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# ORAL HISTORY LESSON PLAN

**PURPOSE:** In-class lesson to be used in conjunction with exhibit tour and program for *Our Lives, Our Stories: America's Greatest Generation* at the Park City Museum.

**OBJECTIVE:** Students will understand what oral history is and why it is important to the historical record by selecting a person to interview, developing appropriate questions, conducting the interview, and transcribing the interview with analysis.

## **INSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES:**

### **Part I: What is Oral History?**

1. Ask students to write down a response to the question: **What is history?** This could be in one word, quick responses, or a paragraph response to a writing prompt. Have students share responses in a class discussion. See where students have similar ideas about what defines history.
2. Follow up question: **How do we know what happened in the past? Who writes history?**
  - a. There are many ways we know about what happened in the past (journals, objects, legal documents, photos, letters). Discuss the students' answers and how they relate to what we know about the past.
  - b. Point out that historians look at a lot of different topics when they study history. They might study politics, wars, big national events, important things we might see on the news. Historians also study the everyday lives and activities of "regular" people.
3. One way we know about the past is by doing **oral history**. What is oral history?

### **Background information**

Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Oral history is not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor. Oral historians attempt to verify their findings, analyze them, and place them in an accurate historical context. Oral historians are also concerned with storage of their findings for use by later scholars.

In oral history projects, an interviewee recalls an event for an interviewer who records the recollections and creates a historical record. Oral history, well done, gives one a sense of accomplishment. Collecting oral history, we have a sense of catching and holding something valuable from the receding tide of the past.

Oral history depends upon human memory and the spoken word. The means of collection can vary from taking notes by hand to elaborate electronic aural and video recordings.

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The human life span puts boundaries on the subject matter that we collect with oral history. We can only go back one lifetime, so our limits move forward in time with each generation. This leads to the Oral Historian's Anxiety Syndrome, that panicky realization that ir retrievable information is slipping away from us with every moment.

**Source** (Oral History Background info): [http://dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html)

## **Part II: Why is oral history important and how does it add to history?**

4. Discuss as a class why oral history is important. Emphasize that it is important to understand **people's stories and their experiences** related to an event.

### Background Information

We all have stories to tell, stories we have lived from the inside out. We give our experiences an order. We organize the memories of our lives into stories.

Oral history listens to these stories. Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Historians currently recognize that everyday memories of everyday people, not just the rich and famous, have historical importance. If we do not collect and preserve those memories, those stories, then one day they will disappear forever.

**Source** (Oral History Background info): [http://dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html)

5. Oral history accounts add the life to the facts. And they give voice to people, regular people, who often aren't involved in writing history.

### Example:

1. In 1933, unemployment had risen from 8 to 15 million and the gross national product had decreased from \$103.8 billion to \$55.7 billion.
  - a. Same fact, but this is an oral history account of that fact:  
"I remember it was awful hard times, and it was hard to get a hold of enough to buy a sack of flour and we made our own breads, cooked our vegetables, bottled our fruits, raised our gardens. We did most of our own cooking and pastry, pies, whatever. Did it all ourselves; we hardly ever bought anything." --Marvell Hunt, recalling life at 19 years old during the Depression in Sevier County, Utah.

**Source:** Family Gallery Guide for "Our Lives, Our Stories: America's Greatest Generation," NEH on the Road, a program of Mid-America Arts Alliance.

6. After reviewing the example, why do you think oral history is important? How does it add to historical accounts? Do you understand the facts differently after listening to the oral history account? Sometimes statistics and numbers as large as this are difficult to relate to. But we might be able to relate to an account of someone's life as told in their own words.

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### **Part III: Doing Oral History**

7. **Explain to the class that they will be doing some of their own oral histories in preparation to visiting the Museum.** They will be visiting the Park City Museum to look at an exhibit about America's Greatest Generation. The exhibit focuses on the oral histories of people who were born in 1910s-1920s and grew up during the Great Depression, came of age during WWII, and helped shape America after the war in the 1950s and 60s. The exhibit is about experience and stories, not just the textbook facts of those eras. It gives those eras life.
8. Instruct students that they will interview an older individual, preferably someone from the Greatest Generation. But this generation is getting older, and many are not alive anymore. Explain that this is why it is important to get their stories. If students cannot interview someone from the Greatest Generation, individuals from the following generations/eras would be ideal for this project:

**The Greatest Generation** (born 1910s and 1920s)

**The Silent Generation** (born 1925 – 1945)

**The Baby Boom Generation** (born post WWII – 1965)

9. Advise students to think of a person they wish to interview. Students may want to brainstorm with their parents or caregiver to determine someone they would be able to interview, such as a grandparent, neighbor, or family friend.

**NOTE:** Some students may not have relatives in the area or may not be close to their neighbors, and some students may be new to the country. In this case, you may want to identify a list of possible people from the generations above who might be willing to be interviewed. Other teachers in the school may be able to help identify some sources.

10. Have the student determine the generation the interviewee belongs to. In preparation for the interview, the student should research the following:
  - a. Historical and significant events, including well known individuals who made the news
  - b. Social and economic conditions
  - c. Culture and other interesting information about the time
11. Students should establish 3-4 informational questions, such as full name, age, date of birth, occupation, where they lived, etc. They should develop 4-5 questions based on significant events of the time period and 3-4 questions regarding what their personal and family life was like as they were growing up. Additional questions are also welcomed and may come up during the course of the interview.
  - a. When asking about the Historical, Social, and Cultural events of the time, develop questions that have the interviewee talk about *their own personal experiences in relation to those events*.
  - b. Examples of what they may ask about, in addition to the Historical, Social, and Cultural events going on:
    - i. What their parents did for a living, what growing up was like (i.e. what toys did they play with, what did they do for fun), what were important events and why, etc).

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- c. It is very important that students phrase their questions so they get a descriptive answer versus a “yes” or “no” answer. Avoid asking questions that begin with “Did you...” or “Were you...” Instead, ask questions such as “How did...”, “Why did...”, or “What did...”
    - d. Remind students that during the course of the interview, other unplanned questions may surface, and as long as they are appropriate, they can be asked.
  12. Students should develop questions ahead of time and bring them to class for review. The handout titled “Oral History Interview Questions Worksheet” may help guide this process. Also consider holding “mock” interviews between students to practice interview skills and questioning before the actual interview occurs.
  13. Students should also plan on asking the interviewee if they have any letters, photographs, or objects that relate to the time period that are important to them in relation to the interview questions and why. Students should obtain permission, and if possible, photograph objects or photocopy important documents that correspond with the oral history stories being told. [Note: Don’t worry about bringing the original items to class or the Museum. A photograph or copy will be perfect. If the interviewee does not have such items, the oral history transcript and notes will be just fine.] This information will be used when the students come to the Museum program, but props such as these also are also useful in making people comfortable sharing stories and help jog their memories.
  14. Students should set up an appointment with their interviewee. They should be prepared to record the interview (if they have the equipment) and take notes. Students need to obtain permission to do both—the handout titled “Interview Release Form” provides all the vital information for doing this. Students should make two copies, one for the interviewee and one for the interviewer.
  15. Remind students that often the people they are interviewing might want to talk for a long time. Have students stick to their questions, so their interviews don’t go too long. Pass out the handout titled “Tips for Oral History Interviews.”

#### **Part IV: Report**

16. Students should write up their interview in Q & A format, so they will have direct quotes. If possible or applicable, students may also write an essay report which will include direct quotes from the oral history, but will include some analysis of the students’ findings.
  - a. Analysis may focus on
    - i. a summary of their findings,
    - ii. what were some of the most interesting things they learned
    - iii. what they found out that was surprising
    - iv. how the stories of the interviewee tell us about that time period (perhaps what they learned from their interview conflicts with what they know or what they have learned in school)
    - v. further questions they would ask if they could go back to learn more and clarify some points.

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17. Inform the students that they will be visiting the exhibit at the Museum and they will see how oral histories have been used in a Museum exhibit and how they tell us about the Greatest Generation.

**Lesson Plan developed by Jenette Purdy, Curator of Education at the Park City Museum.**

**The following sources were drawn on to create the lesson plan:**

Step By Step Guide to Oral History, by Judith Moyer [http://dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html)

The Educational Programming Guide for *Our Lives, Our Stories* © 2010, NEH on the Road, a program of Mid-America Arts Alliance.



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## TEACHER WEBSITE RESOURCES

### For further information on doing oral history:

[http://dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html)

### Examples of oral history projects online:

Rutgers Oral History Archive <http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/>

Library of Congress, American Memory, Life Histories from the Federal Writers' Project

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/exhome.html>

\*The Federal Writers' Project, as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), is a nice tie in to the exhibit, since they functioned during the Depression and focused on getting stories of people many different professions, geographic regions, and cultural backgrounds. They gathered strong accounts of people's experiences during the Depression and former slave accounts.

Archives of American Art, Oral History Collections <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/>

### Example of student produced oral history projects:

What Did You Do in the War Grandma? [http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII\\_Women/tocCS.html](http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII_Women/tocCS.html)

Memories of WWII <http://www.littleton.org/history/mem.asp>

### Example of local oral history projects and the variety of topics they may cover:

American West Center, University of Utah <http://www.hum.utah.edu/amwest/?pageId=2089>